

The background papers on the candidate national program priorities are intended to initiate further discussion. When priorities are selected more detailed strategies with in-depth background information, numerical targets, schedules, milestones and performance measures will be developed.

Proposed Priority: Underground Storage Tanks/Resource Conservation and Recovery Act

Universe and Types of Facilities

An underground storage tank system (UST) is a tank and any underground piping connected to the tank that has at least 10 percent of its combined volume underground. Federal UST regulations apply only to underground tanks and piping storing either petroleum or certain hazardous substances. When the UST program began, there were approximately 2.1 million regulated tanks in the U.S. Today there are far fewer since many substandard UST systems have been closed. From the mid 1980's to 1999, EPA and the states permanently closed approximately 1.3 million federally regulated substandard UST's.

Geographic Range

National.

Environmental Risks

Prior to the mid-1980s, most USTs were made of bare steel, which is likely to corrode over time and allow UST contents to leak into the environment. Faulty installation or inadequate operating and maintenance procedures also can cause USTs to release their contents into the environment.

The greatest potential hazard from a leaking UST is that the petroleum or other hazardous substance can seep into the soil and contaminate groundwater, the source of drinking water for nearly half of all Americans. A leaking UST can present other health and environmental risks, including the potential for fire and explosion. EPA estimates about 25,000 tanks hold hazardous substances covered by UST regulations.

Noncompliance Information

A common problem associated with underground storage tanks is soil and groundwater contamination by MTBE (methyl tertiary butyl ether) and other fuel oxygenates. Owners at many small privately owned gas stations may be unaware of UST regulations or may find it prohibitively expensive to resolve any problems that might be present. Some tanks are owned by marketers who sell gasoline to the public (such as service stations and convenience stores) and others are owned by nonmarketers who use tanks solely for their own needs (such as fleet service operators and local governments.) There is a high rate of noncompliance among underground storage tank operators, particularly among independent owners. In addition to fuel oxygenates, UST's can also contain a variety of other hazardous wastes; there are over 800 substances listed as CERCLA hazardous substances.

EPA and the states have made significant progress over the past 15 years in developing and

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implementing a comprehensive regulatory UST program, which has included the closure of substandard UST's. In addition, new releases have decreased from approximately 26,000 in 1998 to 9000 through mid-year 2003. Even though substantial progress has been made, considerable work - such as improving the compliance rates of UST's - remains to be accomplished. Regular and frequent inspections are necessary to achieve and maintain higher compliance rates. Work needs to continue to permanently close orphaned UST's and to remediate releases from those sites.